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CBS producer defends TV story, insists troop data was 'distorted'

NEW YORK (AP)— American efforts to measure enemy strength during the Vietnam War were "perverted and distorted" in 1967 by the military's desire to keep the estimates low, CBS producer George Crile testified yesterday.

After more than six days of defending his work against challenges by Dan M. Burt, a lawyer for retired Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Mr. Crile went on the offensive under sympathetic cross-examination by CBS lawyer David Boies.

Gen. Westmoreland, who commanded U.S. troops in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968, is suing the network for \$120 million, claiming he was libeled by Mr. Crile's 1982 documentary, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception."

The broadcast charged that in 1967 Gen. Westmoreland was at the center of a "conspiracy" to suppress information showing that communist forces were much larger than had been believed and that they were growing. As a result, the broadcast said, President Lyndon B. Johnson and others in Washington may

have been taken by surprise when the communists launched the powerful Tet offensive of January 1968.

Gen. Westmoreland maintains that the enemy-strength issue was a technical dispute among intelligence experts and that CBS twisted the facts to invent a conspiracy where none existed. He also contends that the estimate of less than 300,000 fighters used at the time was correct, and that the figure of more than 500,000 cited in the documentary includes communist political and "self-defense" forces that were not a military threat.

Mr. Crile, a 39-year-old former magazine editor who had co-produced other documentaries but never made one alone before "The Uncounted Enemy," said yesterday a number of former intelligence officers convinced him that Gen. Westmoreland's command deliberately suppressed higher enemy strength figures for political reasons.

"This is akin to an intelligence atrocity," Mr. Crile said.

The figures that emerged from a "Special National Intelligence Esti-

mate" by Gen. Westmoreland's analysts and their counterparts from the CIA and other agencies in late 1967 were "the consequence of an intelligence command that had not just lost its way, but which became perverted and distorted," Mr. Crile said.

He maintained that the CIA and other agencies "caved in" in the face of a "take-it-or-leave-it" position from Gen. Westmoreland's deputies, who insisted on removing the political and self-defense forces from the estimates.

The result, Mr. Crile said, was a "shell game" in which analysts tried to justify estimates that were based on different assumptions than those used earlier.

"Anytime anybody looked at these figures, we had not only won the war, but we had killed more of the enemy than existed," he said.

Mr. Crile disputed Gen. Westmoreland's claim that the communist forces not in the estimates were not a military threat. The political cadres were "mean and dangerous" and were charged with organizing a "terror campaign" across South Vietnam, he said.

Mr. Crile, the 17th witness in the 11-week-old trial, was the first "hostile witness" summoned by Mr. Burt. Gen. Westmoreland and other witnesses testifying in the general's behalf denied any effort to distort or suppress intelligence figures.



George Crile

AP